

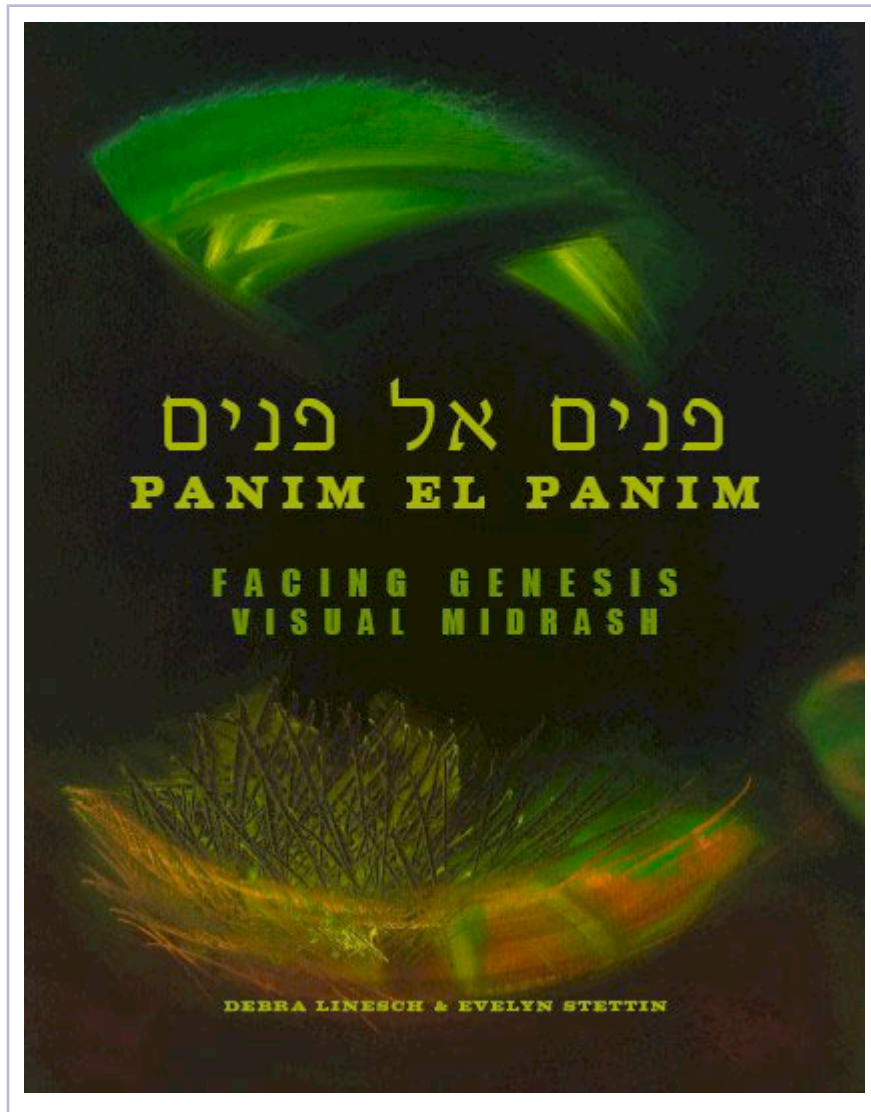
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Jewish art graces Loyola Marymount University

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Loyola Marymount University (LMU), a Jesuit school, will be the surprising venue for an exhibition of Midrash-inspired paintings this weekend.

The show opens Saturday evening as the pre-conference event of the Western Jewish Studies Association's 14th Annual Conference, which takes place Saturday through Monday at the LAX-adjacent LMU campus.

The exhibition is the prelude to the release of the book "Panim el Panim: Facing Genesis, Visual Midrash," which is being published by LMU's press, Tsehai Publishers, and it represents a unique collaboration between Debra Linesch, an art therapist and chair of the Graduate Department of Marital and Family Therapy at LMU, and artist Evelyn Stettin.

Linesch proposed the idea of the exhibition to professor Holli Levitsky, director of Jewish studies at LMU, who enthusiastically supported it as a way of combining the conference's panel discussions of Jewish scholarship with the arts. LMU faculty have been very involved in the publication, Linesch said, including the English translation of the book's Hebrew texts by William Fulco, a Jesuit priest at the school.

"Part of the university's goal is to have larger interfaith conversations," Linesch said.

Linesch and Stettin come from very different Jewish backgrounds. Linesch is an active member of the large Reform

congregation of Temple Israel of Hollywood, while Stettin attends Congregation Mishkan Israel a small storefront Orthodox shul in Los Angeles. The two first met when their children attended nursery school together at the Westside JCC almost 19 years ago, and then reconnected when they met again by chance through Linesch's sister-in-law. Feeling instant chemistry, they embarked on a journey of studying Torah together, which led to this book, a response to the Hebrew Bible through art.

Because of their varying levels of observance, the two had different perspectives on the holy texts. "Debra and I don't always see everything the same way," Stettin said, "Visual Midrash is special, because it supercedes labels. Each person can form their own relationship with the text, and they can bring their own Jewish identity to it."

For their collaboration, Linesch and Stettin studied together weekly, sharing rabbinic, medieval and contemporary commentaries as well as secular poetry, such as that of D.H. Lawrence. The title of the book, "*Panim el Panim*" or "Face to Face," reflects the theme of interaction with the divine found throughout the Bible, but it also became a metaphor for the two women's experience of sharing their different perspectives and for the dialogue between all human beings.

For the project, Stettin created 12 paintings, one for each portion in the book of Genesis. Her expressionistic images are reproduced in the book, along with text written by Linesch, who served as facilitator in the pair's study process. Linesch said that what she wrote is "commentary on our process." Her text, she said, "acknowledges the experience we had together of studying the texts, how we faced our questions about the text and then faced one another about our different vocabularies." The book "is imagery as midrash, a creative response to the questions evoked in the study of Torah," Linesch said.

For Stettin, creating the works offered new insight into biblical study. "Learning about visual Midrash was the first time I felt I could relate to the text without having to be a *talmidei chachamin*," Stettin said, referring to a scholarly person or wise sage.

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